

SEA EAGLES AND MED GULLS LIVEN A LACKLUSTRE BREEDING SEASON

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BTO Research Officer, *David Glue*, describes the nesting fortunes of UK breeding birds in 2000.

AGUILAS Y GAVIOTAS ALEGRAN UNA TEMPORADA SIN BRILLO

David Glue, jefe de investigación del BTO, describe las fortunas nidificantes de las aves reproductoras del Reino Unido en 2000.

LA SAISON DE REPRODUCTION DES PYGARGUES ET LES MOUETTES MELANOCEPHALES

Le chercheur du BTO, *David Glue*, décrit la réussite du nichage des oiseaux du Royaume-Uni en 2000.

SEEDLER UND SCHWARZKOPFMÖWEN BELEBEN EINE LANGWEILIGE BRUTSAISON

BTO-Wissenschaftler *David Glue* bespricht den unterschiedlichen Bruterfolg bei den britischen Brutvogelarten im Jahr 2000.

Another mild winter, premature spring warmth with a late cold snap, vacillating summer temperatures, and see-sawing water levels were features yet again detrimental to the UK's breeding birds.

WOODLARKS AND LONG-TAILED TITS PROFIT FROM EARLY SPRING WARMTH

Following a comparatively poor nesting season in 1999, (*BTO News* 225: 20; 227: 10-12) there were high hopes for 2000. Early on, ringers and survey workers reported buoyant populations

of resident Wrens, Robins and Chaffinches, as well as encouraging local upturns in Song Thrush, Skylark and Bullfinch numbers. "Spring-like" heat in February, prompted a spate of egg-laying among grebes, dabbling ducks, Grey Herons and Tawny Owls. Some unexpectedly early clutches were also started by pairs of Long-eared Owl, Water Rail, Magpie and Wren, while Mallards, Collared Doves and Blackbirds tended healthy broods. This early success was considerably enhanced during a largely dry, settled and sunny March. Clutches of Peregrines, Cormorants, Egyptian Geese, Woodcocks and Woodlarks were

recorded by mid March, while bumper broods of Dippers, Robins, Mistle Thrushes, Long-tailed Tits and Crossbills were free-flying by the month's end.

KINGFISHERS, DIPPERS AND TITS BATTERED BY LATE SPRING DOWNPOURS

Annoyingly, much early nesting season promise was dashed by inclement weather for a third successive April. Winter-like conditions prevailed during the first half of the month. Well-grown broods of Grey Herons, Lapwings, Stonechats, Robins and thrushes all succumbed to the cold, while the wind took its toll of fledgling Rooks, Carrion Crows, Tawny Owls and Woodpigeons.

Regular downpours and rapid snow-melt, led to stressful conditions for many ground-nesting species. Adult Mute Swans and Great Crested Grebes often safely combated rapidly rising water levels, but many cygnets, goslings and ducklings (including those of Eider and Goosander) were saturated, chilled and drowned. Some Black-necked Grebes, Bitterns, Black-tailed Godwits and Bearded Tits were washed out, having initially profited from fresh wetland breeding haunts as a legacy of the winter rains. The wettest April in southern Britain for almost 250 years, checked food supplies and nesting operations by many tits, thrushes and finches, and held back spring migrants. The return of many summer visitors was aided by winds from southern and eastern quarters in late April and early May, when temperatures topped a comfortable 25°C. Populations of Whitethroats, Acrocephalus warblers, martins, Wheatears, Garganeys, Hobbies and Firecrests were buoyant. Cuckoos and Turtle Doves were scarce, while Spotted Flycatchers and Yellow Wagtails were absent from many traditional haunts. Mid May brought a depressing return to unsettled weather, with squally showers and cool days. In some parts of the country, the effects of the wet weather were particularly bad, resulting in huge losses. Stream and lake-side nesting Black-headed Gulls, Kingfishers, Grey Wagtails and Sand Martins suffered repeat losses from flooding in the wettest May since 1993.

SOUTHERN EUROPEAN CELEBRITIES BRIGHTEN AN UNSETTLED JUNE

The uncomfortable, changeable theme persisted throughout much of June, though it was the warmest since 1992 in many areas. Widespread, prolonged downpours on 3rd and 4th, with dramatic flooding in West Yorkshire, swamped coastal seabirds, including burrow-nesting Puffins and other auks on the Farne Islands (for a third successive June); and terns on north and east coasts. Severe gales destroyed some machair shorebird and passerine offspring, forest grouse and finches, moorland raptors and pipits. Finally, came an intense but brief very hot southerly airflow from 17-19th, temperatures topping 33-34°C in the Midlands and East Anglia (in places the highest June values since 1976). Wryneck (Northants), Iberian Chiffchaff (Cornwall), Great Reed Warbler (Lincs and Northants) and Blyth's Reed Warbler (Highland) were reported singing strongly but all failed to attract mates. Spotted Crakes, Quails and Serins enjoyed greater success.

The recent greatly increased wintering populations of Little Egrets and Mediterranean Gulls resulted in the highest breeding numbers yet in the UK. Med Gulls topped 50 pairs, a slow increase since first nesting in 1968. This was largely due to a nucleus of 38 pairs in Langstone Harbour (Hants), though the outlook is promising elsewhere. Several dozen Spoonbills wandered UK wetlands in June, engaging in nesting operations — in SW Scotland (for the first time) and NW England. This follows the first successful breeding in 1998 for over 300 years. Persistent low cloud, regular blustery showers and cool spells, depressed the availability of many aerial insect, wood invertebrate and aquatic food supplies, hitting common and scarce breeding birds alike. Truncated laying seasons and modest sized broods, at best, were features of many nestbox populations of tits, Pied Flycatcher and Redstart. Sea Eagle bucked the downbeat picture: 12 young fledging from eight active nests, involving 19 pairs overall. This matched the 1999 output, in spite of the shameful attentions of several nest collectors. Black

Redstart profited from the extensive redevelopment work in Inner London, pairs at the Thames Barrage and the Millennium Dome providing an extra attraction.

SWIFT AND REED WARBLER DEFY THE DULL UNSETTLED SUMMER

Generally cool, changeable, showery conditions spilled over into the first half of July. Most scrub and leaf warblers (notably Blackcap and Willow Warbler), many Linnets, Yellowhammers, Reed Buntings, Tree and House Sparrows performed poorly overall, nesting activities fading markedly in the dullest summer in the southeast since 1987. Not all was bad though. Regular rains and mild spells suited ground-feeding thrushes, Starlings, Robins and Dunnocks. Goldfinches and Greenfinches were regularly double-brooded in the suburban environment. A sunnier, warmer second half to July, with marked improvements in invertebrate food supplies, helped Hobbies, Swifts and Reed Warblers to rear broods, if often from replacement clutches.

As thundery troughs brought periodic heavy downpours in August, much breeding activity remained low key. By now, though, some Great Crested Grebes, Stone Curlews, Little Ringed Plovers, Nightjars and Swallows had raised two broods, while Blackbirds, Wrens, Pied Wagtails and Stonechats were tending third sets of young. By early September, during a late Indian summer spell, there were reports of Robin, Song Thrush and Stock Dove fledging fourth broods — though these were very much the exceptions.

Modest-sized autumn roosts of wagtails hirundines and thrushes, along with somewhat low capture rates at Constant Effort Sites of certain juvenile tits, warblers and finches were visual legacy of another “below par” year for many. Ironically, after a cold, snowy, late start to nesting operations in April in Scotland, a marginally warmer and drier summer than usual there and in parts of Northern Ireland, favoured certain flagship species. Divers, Golden Eagle, Osprey and a range of forest passerines performed well, Capercaillie enjoyed marginally improved success, but concerns for Red-necked Phalarope and Twite intensified, adding to a topsey turvey season countrywide.